

# Meet the fugly Australians

Slapdash homes and sheds make a literature of corrugated afterthoughts and box in our spirits.

## PHOTOGRAPHY

### Smalltown

By Martin Mischkulnig  
and Tim Winton  
Penguin, 168pp, \$75  
Reviewed by Mark Tredinnick

IN *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder, beat poet and nature writer, talks about scat – droppings – as the literature of the beasts: an inadvertant script, eloquent with what mattered to the animals who made it and left it behind; in particular, how they lived in the places where they made their livings.

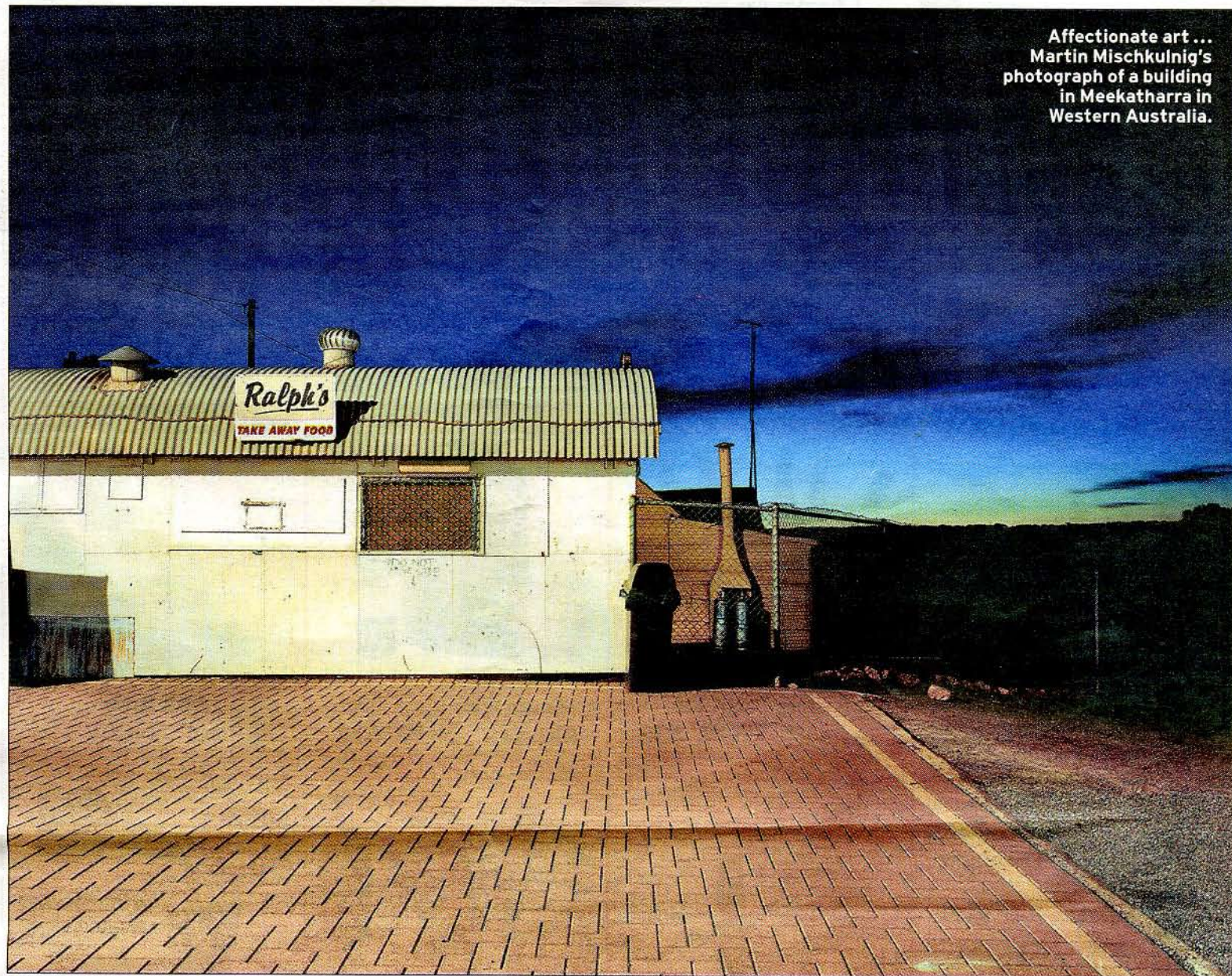
In the same way, vernacular architecture might be read as a literature of place, a found discourse in which a story is told about human belonging.

If you looked, in this way, at the structures Australians have put up in the bush – smalltown shops and out-of-town shacks, progress association halls, roadhouses, railway stations, racing clubs – what would that literature of corrugated afterthoughts have to say about us and how we dwell in country? What would you read there about the ways settler Australians have practised belonging? How at home would you say we feel out there? Or how anxious – or anxious to leave?

These are the questions *Smalltown* puts. Tim Winton ponders them in his frank and elegant essay; Martin Mischkulnig meditates upon them in his affectionate photographs of desolate, abandoned, often frankly “what the f- are you staring at?” ugly, vernacular country buildings.

If you turn the pages of this lovely book, or travel way beyond the city yourself, you’d have to say, with Winton, that our architecture of belonging is not a graceful literature. It speaks of a truculent faith in the gerry-built and the hasty; it implies disdain of beauty; it reads like a prolonged recursive turning from landscapes we find too big to know, too old to love and too powerful to trust.

“Built ugliness,” writes Winton, is so common in remote country towns that “it begins to look inevitable”. “Rural folk,” he notes, “live and work immersed in an implacable ugliness that cannot be



Affectionate art ...  
Martin Mischkulnig's  
photograph of a building  
in Meekatharra in  
Western Australia.

blamed on the natural environment.” Perhaps “unloveliness has become the rural aesthetic, the unspoken visual way of life beyond the metropolis”. But have we settled for ugliness or chosen it?

A bit of both, Winton concludes. He distinguishes “fugliness” – a quaint, proud, heroic and ironical aesthetic that makes do with what it has to hand and heads for the beach or the river or the pub – from “militant carelessness”. “I’m mindful,” he writes, with his own unlovely coastal village in mind, “that there is an important difference between ... not having a care and truly not giving a shit.” But where is the line between omission and

commission, between neglect and abuse, and how do we hold it, and can we be bothered?

The danger of practising ugliness, beyond the dishonour slapdash homes and sheds do to the country that surrounds them, is that it diminishes us; it boxes our spirits in. And the worry is that the meanness of so much smalltown architecture betrays meanness in ourselves, hostility to country we can neither tame nor fathom, an obdurate denial of the virtue of beauty and the disciplines involved in making it. Winton explores these concerns in fresh and hopeful ways, demonstrating what an intelligent and humane writer he is.

Mischkulnig’s photographs are a road trip through outback fugly, a sardonic postmodern pastoral, a lyric essay in the kitsch with which we have, almost everywhere, furnished the interior life of the continent. Mischkulnig grew up in roadside motels in places, presumably, like these; his photographs transfigure ugliness into art by means of technique and love.

All the same, I want to photoshop the shit from the shots; I want to burn the books and give the landscapes back to themselves. But that would be to miss the artistic and philosophical point. We need the clutter that spoils these perfect pictures the way we need the failings that

litter our perfect selves. Ugliness has its uses in art and in life and, I suppose, in architecture. The soul craves an unholy mess, at least now and then: crap saves us from slickness and sentiment; it teaches us to see; it keeps us real. It gives us something to work on.

In these beautiful contemplations of ugliness in rural places, Mischkulnig enacts the disciplines of beauty we would do well to trial in small towns and in the orphan spaces of the inner city and in the splendid wastelands of our inner lives.

The exhibition *Smalltown* is at the Museum of Sydney until February 14.